[The Skippers]

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SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

Life History

TITLE: THE SKIPPERS

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Name Of Person Interviewed Mr. Willie Marlowe (White) Mrs. Sally Marlowe (White)

Fictitious Names Mr. Willie Skipper Mrs. Sally Skipper

Address Route #2, Marion County

Place Marion County, S.C.

Occupation Tenant Farmer

Name of Writer Annie Ruth Davis

Name of Reviser State Office

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Annie Ruth Davis

Marion, S.C.

January 19, 1939 THE SKIPPERS

(White) ROUTE #2, MARION COUNTY

(Rural) SOUTH CAROLINA

Willie and Sally Skipper have been married almost thirty-six years and are now living as tenants on a 90-acre farm, six miles from the town of Marion. They were both born on a farm, began married life on a farm, and hope now that they are back on the farm to stay. To the Skippers, farm life seems to be the only way for them, which feeling was expressed by Sally in these words: “Don't care how hard we've tried all our lives to get away from sticking on the farm, we's still following it.”

The small, unpainted frame house, occupied by the Skippers, stands about a quarter of a mile from the main road. On this crisp, windy January afternoon, the first preparations for the coming year's crop have begun in the spacious field surrounding the house. A Negro boy, with two big fat mules hitched to a two-horse plow, whistles as he turns the soil for the next crop. Everything is in a stir around the little house. Geese guineas, ducks, turkeys, and chickens are scattered here, there, and yonder about the yard, while seven kittens and two dogs play up and down the porch and steps of the house. Willie Skipper 2 is at work, thirty feet from the house, building a log smokehouse.

“Howdy, mam. You've caught me in a right smart of a job this evening, but you just go in the house with Sally, I'll be in toreckly. No, I'm glad of a chance to knock off for a talking spell, being there's nothing pushing 'bout this job nohow. A let-up, when I'm tired, don't never do me no harm noways.”

About that time, Sally came around the house, wearing a neat print dress and black gingham apron, curious to know who her husband was speaking to. Though badly cross-eyed, Sally is not a bad looking woman. She is tall and strongly built with a healthy sunburned complexion, brown eyes, dark brown hair, cut in ragged lengths, and looks as though she might be more physically fit to run the farm than her husband. Unusually

pleasing and cheerful in her manners, Sally is a great talker and always has a word on the tip edge of her tongue for every occasion. On the other hand, Willie Skipper, a sallow-faced, unhealthy looking man, goes about what he says and does in his own quiet and patient way.

“Willie, questioned Sally, ain't you got no manners? Well, it you have, you must be hiding them under your hat. This child wants you to tell her a history of your life and you standing there sawing on them logs right on. If you can't do no better than that, I better be shooting her a line on my own life, I reckon. Come on in the house, 3 child, this wind's enough to give you all kind of ailments. Willie, don't you be long knocking off out there neither, I don't want you coughing me out of bed tonight.”

Sally opened the front door of the house and asked her visitor to step directly into their own bedroom, which was so clean that one might say it was spotless. A large wooden bedstead, covered with a faded cretonne cover, took up the greater part of the freshly scoured, bare floor space. A washstand, bureau, and table, on which stood a kerosene lamp, occupied the remaining corners of the room, while three chairs were drawn around a cheerful oak fire. On the walls hung several colorful calendars along with an enlarged picture of Woodrow Wilson, and on the mantel, decorated with numerous medicine bottles, matches, and papers, a Big Ben clock ticked the hours away. Sally brushed around the hearth a little and by that time, Willie Skipper came in the back door and dropped down in his corner by the hearth.

“It's a pity I ain't got no parlor to ask you in, but we've got just three rooms and can't spare no regular company room. Cose there ain't nobody here but me and Willie, but Mae or Laura and their younguns comes over now and then to spend a night with us,- them's the only two children we've got living now - and that's how-come we keeps two beds going. That just leaves us one spare room to do our cooking and eating in. I'm sho' glad 4 Willie's putting up that smokehouse for it's the awfullest mess on this earth with all our hog meat setting around all over the house. Why, child, them bureau drawers over there, they stayed

plum full of meat for a time last winter. But time's a flying, and this ain't getting you what you come after. Willie, set up there and talk your mind."

"I don't know exactly what you aiming at, but I can take a shot at it anyhow, I reckon, said Willie. I was born on a farm, six miles below the town of Marion, and I'm now fifty-five years old. My father rented that farm then and it was hard, but we got along somehow. Yes'm, I come up on four and five cents cotton. There were eight head of we children along with my father and mother to eat all the time, but rations wasn't no such problem with people then like it is these days. You see, people made 'bout all their provisions on the farm then and could live more at home. Cose we didn't make no flour in my early days, but we had plenty of corn and didn't live out of no paper sack neither. Had all the meat, potatoes, peas, sirup, and collards that we could destroy in my boyhood days. We lived on fifty acres of cleared land and I've seen my father gather his whole crop of fodder and not spend a nickel. Oh, he paid the hands off in meat, corn, and the like - never thought to pay them no money. Reckon my father killed fifteen to twenty hogs every year that come.

5

"When I was a boy coming up, we children stuck right close home 'bout all the time, you might say. Didn't see out nowhere much 'cause we didn't have nothing but the wagon or cart to get 'bout in. Cose we went to school some to Bakersville, but we never did get such learning. Out of five months of school running, we didn't get no more than three months in all - never went no further than the third grade myself. You see, in the spring of the year, we children would have to quit school and help plough. Then in the fall, we had to help gather the crops. People didn't have the machinery and conveniences long them times to do the work of two men out on time -had to/ go by single plough then.

"No, children didn't get to see out much for like I'm telling you, our parents sho' kept us pretty strict home. They told us when we could go somewheres and if we didn't get back on time, we sho' paid our regrets for it."

“And people don't whip children like they used to, chimed in Sally. That's how-come they's so naughty and rude these days. Talking out of my own mouth, teachers was lots stricter on children then than they are now, too. I remember, Mr. Jim Lucky, he was so tight, he wasn't even pleasant. We used to run off in the woods on April Fools' Day and stay till twelve o'clock noon come - then we would all show up to the schoolhouse. What you reckon they done to us for it? Kept us in school so late every evening that 6 week till the moon would be shining bright enough to show us the road home.”

“But we was sho' made to go to them prayer meetings every Wednesday/ evening to different ones of the neighbor's houses, said Willie. I remember, old Mike Brown was one of the leading boys in them meetings, and I hate to think 'bout the way he died. He moved up to Latta and started drinking so hard, he was in awful shape. Just don't see why Mike done that way for nohow.”

“Weakness, I reckon, joined in Sally. Yes'm, he got drunk one cold night in January and never overed it that time. Yes, it sho' hurts me to think about how old Mike turned out.

“Honey, I never saw but one drunk man in all my life till I was a grown woman. I'll tell you the truth, liquor's all what's ruined this country, I think, and that's 'cause everybody's putting God out their hearts. The old saying is: 'People don't fear God, man, nor the devil.' Why, child, most people today don't realize there's a God and a hereafter. A man stood up out yonder to our tobacco barn not long ago and said he didn't believe that God knows one thing 'bout what people do on earth - don't even know the wind's blowing. I just don't know how man can have such talk as that. People used to go to church and act like humans, but there's few what's like that now. Cose I don't say there's not some good people left.”

7

“Now, Sally, you hush and let me get back on my line, broke in Willie. Let me see, where was I? You've just gone and knocked me clean off the track with that big mouth of yours wagging all the time.

“I stayed on home nineteen years and then I went down to Britton's Neck and married Sally Steeple. Thought she'd more than likely suit me, being she come up on a farm same as I did. We come on back to Centenary and went to work for wages on a place next to where my father was renting. Wages were mighty poor along that time, but we managed to eke out a living there for 'bout three years. The landowner, he allowed me two acres of land to make our provisions on and furnished the team to plough it, but no fertilizer. You see, tending of the crop was all in the day's work.”

“Willie, I don't see what's ailing you nohow holding back your speech like that. Don't see why you don't go on and speak out just like it was. To be sure, ain't nothing to be shame of, interrupted Sally. Why don't you tell her you drawed six dollars a month, twenty-six cents a day, a peck of meal and three pounds of meat a week - fat back at that - and no flour at all! Yes'm, that's just what we lived on them first three years after I married Willie.”

Willie Skipper sat back and listened patiently until Sally stopped to catch breath and seeing his opportunity, he quickly caught up the conversation again. “Them wages was so poor, we wasn't making a decent living down next 8 Centenary, so we pulled up and moved over next Mullins on a man's place. That man over there paid me better wages - give me all of fifty cents a day, a potato patch, and a garden. In l903, our first child was born. Then we moved on another farm above Mullins and I tried my hand at share-cropping on a eight-horse farm.”

“Well, you sho' never made no killing that year - didn't do nothing, like as I can see it, but put me and you both in a pack of trouble, broke in Sally. Why, the fellow that owned that farm was so crooked, every man on the place sold out before the year was over and worked for wages the rest of the time. And here come another youngun along that year, too.”

“I'll be jumped up, Sally, you still grumbling 'bout something that's clean out of sight. I wouldn't never think to bring it to my mind without you all the time bringing it up. We never

stayed there but just that one year and it never hurt none of us as I can see. Left there and went down to Horry County and hired out on a farm three years for fifty cents a day. The land wasn't so sorry in that country and if I hadn't been troubled with so much sickness, we would've got along good, I reckon. But we lost one baby that year and I nearly lost my wife

“After them three years in Horry County, we come on back to Marion in 1909 and I took to public work for a spell. Got work in a blacksmith's shop that first year and we got along pretty well. Blacksmith's earned a right good living then 9 “cause people made their own ploughs and bout all their tools in them days, but now it's to order or go to the store for them. Cose the old way is slower, but I like it better.

“The second year I was in Marion, I got a job in the electrical business fooling with such as cable stuff and the like - just picked it up and learned it in time. It was interesting and I enjoyed the work, but there wasn't enough in it to keep me on the job - no regular pay to speak of. When I left that job, I went back to the farm and tried my hand at sharecropping for another year.”

“Ain't you go tell the balance of what happened to you on the farm that year, Willie? said Sally. You'll have folks thinking you ain't never one to stick on a job long to a time. You see, Willie's health broke on him that year and that's how-come he had to give up work on the farm. Yes'm, he was ruptured on both sides and we thought he was going to die. The doctor said he would have to go to Charleston and stay four months in the hospital to do him any good. Well, he come through Marion on his way to the hospital and met up with Mr. Jackson, the bakery man, on Main Street. He offered Willie a job in his bakery to do a little light work to start with and he took it. He worked two weeks on that job before I got word of it and me back on the farm a thinking all the time he was in the hospital. Yes'm, he went to the drug store in Marion and bought 10 a truss and that cured him. That's all the hospital he ever seen and that's how he got stuck in the bakery all of them years. Stayed there all of eighteen years and mixed bread and he ain't been a bit of good since. The

doctor said he had tuberculosis and sent him to a T.B. camp, but he run away from it and come back home in six weeks time. He's yet no good, but he's not got no T.B."

"Yes, I worked mighty hard in that bakery, said Willie. Kept on the job from fourteen to twenty hours a day - mixed and baked in the morning and afternoon and drove a truck in the evening. Cose it was a good job, but it's going back on me today - couldn't see it then though. I made a hundred dollars a month in the bakery, but if I never had seen a penny of it, I reckon I would've been better off. It got to where all the mixing was shoved off on me and I got so poor and dried up, I had the doctor examine me. He told me I had tuberculosis and must stay out in the fresh air more. Said I better go to a T.B. camp, if I wanted to get over it, and he'd do what he could to get me in. I went and tried it six weeks, but all that rest and nursing wasn't nothing but punishment to me. I come on back home, moved back on the farm, and I've been getting better every day since we've been living here."

"We've been living on this farm now going on six years, added Sally. Yes'm, we like it here for Mr. Hamer, the man what owns this land, he's as nice to sharecrop with as anybody would want to find. When Willie's moved from here, they'll 11 carry him out foot foremost, I reckon. No'm, we ain't aiming to leave this place long as we can help ourselves."

"Yes, I like sharecropping with a man like Mr. Hamer 'cause he's so fair and square, it pays me, said Willie."

"It sho' seems tough though to think 'bout all the hard work we puts out and don't get but half what's made," spoke up Sally.

"It appears hard in one way and in another way, it don't, returned Willie. Mr. Hamer has all them taxes and insurance to keep up and, I'll tell you, that's costing him something."

"You reckon he's got insurance on this house we living in?" questioned Sally.

"Oh, yes, answered Willie, Mr. Hamer wouldn't own a chicken coop that wasn't insured."

“I've a mind he better be putting some insurance on what we've got in this house, too, 'cause I ain't setting easy with them old log trains shooting by the swamp and flying sparks right over here on our house. I know I've got some nice things that's took me a lifetime to get and I ain't aiming to get rid of none of them.”

“But Mr. Hamer ain't supposed to be taking care of us, Sally, interrupted Willie. We's getting along 'bout as good as we belongs to. we got 2.1 acres of tobacco on this place last year and made $300.00 to the acre on it. We would've made more, but we sold our sorry tobacco in high-priced times and kept the good one till tobacco prices dropped way down. Had five acres of cotton, too, but we just got 12 one bale off it. I planted three times and never did get a decent stand. Finally, what did come up, it was so late till the boll weevil devoured it. Then I made all of 200 bushels of corn on eight acres of land. We rent our corn land for cash and don't have to part half of it with Mr. Hamer.

“I've bought four mules since we've been living here, and we's hoping to raise enough hogs this coming year to keep us in meat year in and year out. We don't care much for the meat the way we've been having to cure it. It gets rusty late in the fall and smells so strong, we've been buying meat for about two months out the year. That's how-come I'm building that smokehouse to keep it in.”

“We's trying to get to the place where we can live at home and board at the same place, explained Sally. Yes'm, that's the end we's trying to go to. We make all our own flour and more potatoes than us and Mr. Hamer can use. We've done sold off $15.00 worth of potatoes and we still got 'bout that much more to sell. We gets seventy-five cents a bushel for them.

“Me and Willie was figuring the other day 'bout what a good start we've got to build on next year. I've got thirteen geese, eight guineas, four ducks, seven turkeys, and I don't know how many chickens wandering around the premises that I'm raising on shares for Mr. Hamer. Reckon we've got almost everything that's got feathers on it. Mr. Hamer said

he wants me to 13 keep all the geese and get shed of all the ganders 'cept one. Mr. Hamer put three turkeys here and I raised twenty that I hatched off myself, but I have to look after all of them and Mr. Hamer, he gets half what's made on them. I got $17.00 for my share of the Thanksgiving turkey money and I just up and told Mr. Hamer that none of my turkey money was going back on the farm this time."

"Yes'm, that's one time Sally never let nobody have no say 'bout what her dollars were going for but herself, laughed Willie. She went to town last Saturday and bought a whole spread of things with her turkey money. Even set me up to a sweater with a portion of it."

"Well, it's like this, I needed them garments, said Sally, and knowing it was my chance to get them, I never wasted it. I bought me a coat, a sweater, three dresses, three pair of stockings, two suits of underwear, and all of it come out of my turkey money. Them turkeys, they's hard to raise, but turkey money comes in mighty good, I'll tell you.

"This government work is holding us all down from making what we ought to on the farm these days. If the government would turn people loose and everybody would go to work for themselves, this country would be a sight better off. The government work is all right for some folks, but them what's able to work and sits down on the government, it just ain't right. Don't think the government has any right to uphold the Niggers like it does neither. My husband's not able to 14 work, but he's obliged to work. He's ruptured again and bothered with this chest trouble, too, but the government woman come flat out and told me they wouldn't help us none 'cause we living on Mr. Hamer's place. But he ain't keeping us up. We've got no way to go nowhere 'cept in the wagon, while the Niggers drives automobiles and the government's feeding them. Knowing Niggers like I do, the most of them ain't go worry to work none long as they can get enough to eat and get along somehow. Labor's something hard to get these days and just 'cause the government's feeding the Niggers and they's wasting their time away."